

What follows will hopefully give the reader some insight into the issues and challenges that the US has faced in dealing with the Pandemic. I have tried hard not to portray personal policy views, judgment on senior political figures or my own values. That said please excuse me this first value statement.

“OLD PEOPLE AND THEIR LIVES MATTER!”

First, let me confess to being 58 years old and a regular recipient of “OK Boomer” from my 21-year-old daughter. That said the pervasive view that most people who have died as a result of COVID 19 (or associated complications) are old, have preexisting health issues and would have/will die soon anyway offends me. All these people are a Parent, Grand Parent, spouse/partner, friend or mentor. They all have value. As someone who lost a wife to a long battle with cancer, I believe every day is precious. It offers the opportunity to help someone, influence their life and reinforce our need for connection. The answer to this crisis can not be “let the old folks die”.

THIS IS A CRISIS AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT IS DIFFERENT

In a crisis timescales get compressed, anxiety levels climb, key people literally get worn out and desperation leads to everyone having an opinion. In today’s social media world, I could add everyone has a conspiracy theory. If the initial crisis is not fixed quickly it creates crises in adjacent areas. Most of these aspects are probably obvious; what may be less obvious is that the people who usually are considered to be powerful, directing things and in control (think C suite executives, senior political figures) can often do very little to solve the problem.

Indeed, they invariably become the most anxious and desperate. In my own experience of running large scale technology and operations groups these individuals (and I include myself) do not possess the detailed technical expertise to diagnose and fix the current crisis or guarantee it won’t happen again. They are not equipped to say when a solution will be available. It is, or should be, a humbling experience.

What they must do is ensure that the real experts are involved, that they get the critical resources they need and that they are not distracted. They absolutely have the responsibility to vet solutions and assess the respective risks, but they are reliant on the skills and expertise of the experts. They have a key role in ensuring that clear, concise, factual information is communicated. They must be honest when “we don’t know but are working on it” or when guidance changes, as it inevitably does (to mask or not to mask).

It requires a relentless focus on what is important, an ability to tune out the noise and not speculate or over sell. This can be challenging for individuals who have experienced considerable success, maybe have an inflated ego and can be prone to placing a high value on their opinions. Wherever you live I will leave you to assess how your important folks are doing ...

FUNNILY ENOUGH THE US IS NOT WELL CONFIGURED FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Despite having lived in the US for nearly seventeen years its only recently dawned on me that in certain situations the Federal Government is not as powerful as it seems. Certainly, it commands a huge budget, a dominant military, the world’s reserve currency and tremendous influence internationally. That said it was not designed to be all powerful domestically. Its constitution calls for a federation of individual states; each of which has and retains considerable independence in policies and laws. Individually, states and their Governors are quite powerful. Implementation of significant federal laws and policies was designed to take time and to respect the rights of States. In the US Senate it doesn’t matter if you have 40 million or half a million citizens; you still get two

Senators. Controversial increases in Federal power, even if passed into law, often get litigated in the Courts and can be deemed “unconstitutional”.

Alongside this structure is a fairly widespread culture of distrust or at least ambivalence towards Government and its interference in the lives of citizens. It’s clear to me that any European’s concerns about Brussels can be “trumped” by American’s concern, distrust and disgust of Washington DC. All US Presidents understand this balance and are careful to invoke Executive power over the individual states. Sometimes their rhetoric doesn’t display this but generally their actions do.

All this leads to the very different approaches that individual States have taken to matters like social distancing, definition of essential businesses, use of open spaces and now trying to restart their economies. I think its fair to say that the Pandemic provides a challenge to the federal government ensuring effective crisis management for the whole country. One could say that the pandemic is not respectful of States’ rights...

THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM IS EVEN MORE DEVOLVED

The Healthcare system in the US in many ways amplifies the challenges of a National crisis. It embodies the central US beliefs in market economics, innovation and consumer choice. It is a network of private providers and hospitals combined with public hospitals (and whole public systems for providing care to Military Veterans). Most treatment is approved and reimbursed through health insurance schemes; again, these are both private and public.

Decisions on capacity, procurement and priorities are devolved to individual hospitals/networks and providers. There is no nationwide system to co-ordinate a response to a pandemic; the Federal Government’s role has largely been to issue guidelines and encourage private companies to produce necessary equipment. This has been evidenced in recent weeks by States, or even individual networks, procuring their own essential equipment and supplies, often internationally and sometimes in direct competition with each other. The Federal Government could cut through this and mandate companies to produce equipment and supplies and direct it to the priority parts of the US through invoking “The Defense Production Act”. To-date it appears that this has been invoked in name only.

The structure of the US Healthcare System in the US is often a surprise to many Europeans who are familiar with stronger National structures. It seems not to be the most efficient way of providing healthcare access to all. This highlights the key difference; it is not designed to do so.

My personal view is that the US has yet to decide that healthcare access is a basic right (as opposed to something one earns). Several million Americans do not have access to employer or government provided insurance and chose not to purchase their own (typically very expensive) private insurance.

Universal healthcare access has been a critical issue in the Democrat Presidential primaries and it remains to be seen whether the pandemic influences public opinion as we head to the November election. Typically, someone else’s lack of health care access does not affect my own health; this is not true in the case of a virus especially as pressure mounts to open up the economy.

HOW DOES THE US RECOVER FROM THE PANDEMIC?

To be honest I’m not sure anybody really knows. I’m not sure anyone has experienced a simultaneous, near shutdown of the global economy and has proven policies and solutions ready to go. Here are a few thoughts:

- It's not a choice between health and the economy; they need to work in tandem. Many people's personal behavior will change as a result of this crisis. Until there is confidence that the virus can be controlled medically many will avoid crowded situations (shopping malls, sporting events, planes, hotels, commuting etc.). Concerns about job security will reduce discretionary spending. People in lockdown will perhaps realize that they don't need so much "stuff". Opening the economy requires confidence that we are as safe and well as we can be.
- The impact will be greater and longer than the markets seem to think based on the partial recovery in equity prices. Currently, there does seem to be a disconnect between "Main Street" and "Wall Street". I know its wrong to generalize from a limited sample but when I look at Santa Fe (where I live), I see enormous challenges for a city that relies heavily on tourism, large cultural events and Art. Most of the key events for this Summer have already been cancelled and the knock-on impact on hotels, restaurants, bars, galleries and state tax receipts will be very significant. Many businesses will be lost. Given that the rest of the State relies on Oil revenues the outlook is very tough.
- We all have a role in supporting the health and economic recovery. In lieu of significant medical breakthroughs I expect we will need to observe forms of social distancing and sanitizing as we go about home life, work and leisure. The more people observe these the better we will do from a health and economic standpoint. Perhaps we also have a role in supporting the businesses based in our communities. The Amazons and Googles of the world have plenty of cash on hand to ride this out; the local restaurant, retail outlet, gallery less so. Our communities need jobs and places to connect.
- There will be significant structural changes and innovations. I work with businesses that currently have almost 95% of their people working remotely. It may not be perfect, but they are operating. Perhaps the future of higher education is not four years on site amassing around \$200k of debt. Maybe we can significantly reduce the impact we have on the environment. Maybe global supply chains need to be re-examined.
- The typical US strengths of optimism, entrepreneurial spirit and hard work, while challenged a little at present, will be a significant factor in the strength and speed of recovery. That said some will need to "hold their nose" and accept greater Government involvement to prop up the economy and avoid a depression. Maybe they will have to accept universal health care.

Above all, I hope we learn that we are much more reliant on others, even strangers, than we acknowledge. Let's hope it doesn't always need a crisis to remind us of this fundamental truth.

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